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Consumer advisory services

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Association

*Paper presented at the 49th Aslib Annual Conference, Van Mildert College, Durham,
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1. The development of consumer bodies as sources of consumer information (Michael Tilleard)

ANY HISTORICAL SURVEY of the way in which consumers have organized themselves into associations for their own mutual benefit and protection should really begin with the role played by the consumer co-operative movement. But, as Jeremy Mitchell (former Head of Information at Consumers' Association and now Director of the Consumer Affairs Division at the Office of Fair Trading) has pointed out, the co-operative movement was not really a consumer association at all: 'The fact that the consumer, in a co-operative society, is the formal owner of the means of distribution seems to have little significance in practical terms. By analogy, it can be compared with the consumer's formal ownership of the means of production in a nationalized industry, or the individual shareholder's formal ownership of a joint-stock company.'¹

The history of the consumer movement that I would like to outline for you is one which has really evolved quite separately from the co-operative movement. It has developed in response to various needs which made it essential that the associations of consumers that were set up had, unlike the co-operative movement, no actual involvement with the activities of the trading community. The economic and social changes which have led large numbers of individuals to adopt what Galbraith has called 'countervailing power',² by organizing themselves into associations of consumers of goods and services, are ones which are directly related to changes in the market economy. In particular, technological changes have meant a vast increase in the production and distribution of goods of all kinds. Such goods are assembled using highly sophisticated production techniques and will consist of components and materials whose nature and composition are a complete mystery to the mass of ordinary consumers. Backed by powerful and persuasive marketing and advertising campaigns, the supplier of goods and services has built up a tremendous advantage over the individual purchaser of these goods or user of these services.

As the Molony Committee on Consumer Protection, which reported in 1962, said: 'In truth the producer is dominant and his voice is all powerful. His interests usually prevail over the welfare of consumers.'³

Information and advertising

As more and more goods of varying quality and performance become available, so the consumer's existing store of knowledge about the nature of particular commodities becomes less and less useful to him in helping him to make a wise choice when buying. What he needs is information which will at least help to some extent to redress the balance between his knowledge of the goods and that of the combined forces of the manufacturer, advertiser and retailer. The collation and dissemination of this kind of impartial information has been the main function of the consumer organizations which have been established in the last fifty years.

But first, what kinds of sources of information does the ordinary consumer tend normally to rely on which will give him some kind of guidance when making buying decisions. As mentioned, he will build up a certain store of knowledge based on past experience of particular brands. He will rely quite heavily on recommendations of friends or relatives, on information from sales leaflets or simply, as most people do, on discussions with the retailers themselves. But I think it is accepted in our society that the main source of information about goods and services available to the consumer is advertising. The problem, of course, is to what extent the ordinary consumer is able to make the fine distinction between what is factual information in an advertisement and what is propaganda.

In spite of the strengthening of the advertising industry's own voluntary system of control, the Advertising Standards Authority, over the last few years the public image of advertising as a means of conveying basic, factual, information about the nature of goods and services has hardly improved. A survey carried out by National Opinion Polls in 1965 amongst a representative sample of adults in the UK showed that fifty-three per cent of those interviewed thought that advertisements, generally, presented a false picture of the product advertised;⁴ a further survey earlier this year reported that fifty-two per cent of respondents disagreed with the statement that most advertisements tell the truth.⁵ Nevertheless consumers, particularly in the lower social groups, do continue to rely on advertisements as a primary source of product information, and will continue to do so in the absence of more independent sources. We hope of course that the unbiased information and advice offered by Consumer Advice Centres will act as a counterbalance to the influence of advertising, but it is clear that a further tightening up of controls on the uses—or misuses—of advertising is necessary.

Further moves are afoot in this country for such controls, though we have a long way to go before we can compare with the American system. In the States, for example, the Federal Trade Commission, as a penalty for misleading advertising, forced the producer of a slimming bread called Profile to announce in their commercials on TV that Profile had only seven fewer calories per slice than ordinary bread, and that was only because it was sliced thinner!⁶

I do not want to go further into the debate on the need for more factual information as opposed to propaganda in advertising, since Charles Medawar has put the case for more stringent advertising controls very forcibly and very clearly elsewhere.⁷ It will be sufficient at this stage to quote the rather contra-

dictory statements put out by the Advertising Association and its own Advertising Standards Authority on what the function of advertising really is. 'The main function of advertising', says the Advertising Association, 'is to give the consumer truthful and valuable information on goods and services offered'. However, a former Chairman of the ASA has said that 'The main purpose and function of advertising . . . (is) . . . to act as a selling tool', and not, as Medawar points out, to provide a public information service. If the industry itself is that confused about its function then it is not surprising that the consumer has little faith in advertisements as sources of information and enlightenment.

Consumer organizations

What kind of organizations have developed to act as representatives of this countervailing power on behalf of consumers?

In 1927 an economist, Stuart Chase, and a mechanical engineer from the American Standards Institution, F. J. Schlink, wrote a best selling book called *Your Money's Worth*. The book explained that the American Government had arranged for the National Bureau of Standards to test goods for the Services and Government Departments, so that they then knew the quality of what they were offered and so could choose the best value for their money. As a result this saved the US Government about \$100 million a year. The authors simply posed the question of why the American taxpayer, who ultimately paid for all the work to be done by the NBS, should not also have access to this kind of information and so help him make a substantial saving in his annual income. The US Government, for example, were able to obtain such commodities as maple syrup for half the price paid by other people, because it knew which kind of syrup was best value for money. The authors of course were inundated with letters asking them what really was in the various brands of syrup, as well as for more information on every other type of product from toothpaste to motor cars, from instant coffee to washing machines. The writers said that they could provide this information to the enquirer, but the cost would be a dollar a year. So from their position in the NBS, Chase and Schlink could act like 'gate-keepers' for the consumer, though at this stage the information transfer was really a one-way process. It was not until Consumers' Union, which eventually grew out of Chase and Schlinks' work, became firmly established that manufacturers began to take into account the information from CU's *Consumer Reports* when designing new products. CU now has over two million subscribers and an annual income of \$16 million.

The important factor about the origins of Consumers' Union is how it sheds light on what motivates the public to acquire information. The publication of the book *Your Money's Worth* and the public reaction to it certainly bears out what Daphne Grose said in her paper on 'The deprived information user' to this conference two years ago, namely that 'the great mass of the population needs to be told that interesting information is available before it will come and ask anything.'⁸

As with the National Bureau of Standards in the States, one of the first bodies in this country to recognize the need for impartial information on consumer goods was the British Standards Institution. The BSI agreed to

formulate standards under the 'Kitemark' scheme which was to replace the Utility specifications which had been abolished. In 1955 the BSI set up the Consumer Advisory Council, which was the first organization to provide a complaints and advisory service, and also to publish the first British comparative testing magazine, called *Shoppers' Guide*. It was hoped that by publishing comparative test reports, the CAC could bring greater pressure to bear on manufacturers to improve their standards for consumer goods. It also acted as a useful information source on consumer affairs generally, as well as campaigning on legislative matters such as the need for reforms in Hire Purchase transactions and the Sale of Goods Act. However, being a part of BSI, which of course is partly financed by industry, some manufacturers began to question whether they could finance a publication, one of whose functions was necessarily to criticize goods produced by these manufacturers. This was one of the reasons which led to *Shoppers' Guide* ceasing publication in 1962.

However, just a few months after the first issue of *Shoppers' Guide* appeared in 1957, a sociologist named Michael Young, with initial help from some economists, a solicitor, a barrister, an engineer and a film director, produced the first issue of what he called *Which?* The first issue dealt with comparative test reports on electric kettles, scouring powders, drip dry shirts, cake mixes, sunglasses, and a summary of a Consumers' Union report on small foreign cars. Not really knowing whether the public actually needed information of this kind, and fearing that the venture would immediately fall foul of the English law of libel, there was considerable doubt as to whether the magazine would survive for long. However membership of the newly-formed Consumers' Association grew at an amazing rate. Several thousand joined in the first month and within two years there were 122,000 subscribers. Today there are over 700,000 members and an annual revenue of around £3½ million.

CA has been, and probably always will be, essentially a publishing organization whose main function is the presentation of comparative test data in response to the information needs of its members. In producing its reports on goods and services CA relies very heavily on information provided by its members, both in order to initiate ideas for projects and to test these ideas out in practice. CA's own information and advisory service, which has a staff of twelve dealing with over 200 letters and telephone calls a day on all kinds of consumer problems and queries, is in itself an essential link in the information chain between members of CA and the research and editorial departments. It also provides much useful information to CA's Consumer Campaign Committee (Secretary, Daphne Grose). The responsibility of the Consumer Campaign Committee includes representation and campaigning on a wide range of consumer topics of public interest, such as safety standards, the strengthening of the consumer consultative machinery in the nationalized industries, and effective representation of the consumer view in the EEC.

Of course the main criticism directed at CA is that the majority of consumers do not read consumer testing magazines like *Which?* (the estimated readership is about three million, thanks mainly to public libraries). That membership is largely confined to the higher socio-economic classes is again confirmed in the recent National Opinion Poll survey referred to above.⁹ This showed that of the

eight per cent of the total sample of respondents who read *Which?*, twenty-two per cent of these belonged to the highest social class (AB) compared with only one per cent of the lowest social class (DE).

The disadvantaged consumer

I would like to look now therefore at the developments in the movement to provide information and advice to the lower-income and less articulate consumer, which has culminated of course in the establishment of a network of local consumer advice centres and advisory services.

As Peter Goldman, Director of CA, said in 1966: 'It is precisely the educationally underprivileged who are most vulnerable to misinformation, least able to afford expensive mistakes and therefore most in need of independent assessment and guidance.'¹⁰ This view is certainly borne out by an American study of low-income consumers. Caplowitz, in a book entitled *The Poor Pay More* published in 1963, showed that lower-income groups engaged in what he calls 'compensatory consumption'. That is, lower-income groups were just as likely to buy expensive consumer durables as groups with much higher incomes, simply as compensation for their lack of social mobility. Having only a small amount of cash and poor credit rating, they were thus more susceptible to being sold goods of poorer quality, via sales techniques which were more likely to be fraudulent or misleading.

It is interesting to note that the recently-formed National Consumer Council (which held its first conference on 19th-20th September 1975) concerned itself very much with the problems of the underprivileged consumer, both as a purchaser of goods and a user of all types of service, private and public. One project currently under way also deals with the theme 'The poor pay more.' The Chairman of the NCC, Michael Young, would like to see the NCC as a fourth voice—that of the consumer—added to the present triple alliance which has supreme power in this country, namely the unions, business, and government.

The problems of the low-income consumer have certainly not diminished in the last few years. This can be seen, for example, in the difficulties low-income families are now having in paying the recent huge increases in fuel costs. The Child Poverty Action Group announced recently that eight in every ten enquiries they receive are either exclusively or partly concerned with gas and electricity costs. The fact that the pensioner or the low-income family tends to use the most expensive forms of heating, such as one- or two-bar electric fires, probably lies at the root of the problem. But then they are unlikely to read the September 1975 copy of *Which?*, which is devoted largely to fuel costs and savings. Unless there are alternative ways of communicating this information to non-*Which?* readers, then the poor will continue to pay more.

The first body to be set up under Government sponsorship to concern itself with the problems facing *all* consumers was the Consumer Council. Established in 1963, on the recommendation of the Molony Committee which sat from 1959-62, its job was to inform itself about consumer problems, take action to deal with these problems after consultation with others, and to provide advice and guidance to consumers. It was not allowed to handle consumer complaints or carry

out comparative testing. In spite of the limitations of its budget of only £240,000 it did carry out some valuable work, including campaigning for the abolition of resale price maintenance, strengthening the Trade Descriptions Act, the introduction of the Teltag labelling scheme (the only really independent source of information for the buyer at the point of sale), and standardization of regulations for safety in electrical goods. It also produced reports on insurance, doorstep selling, inertia selling, mortgage brokers and other services whose operations were not always highly ethical in character, and which are often directed at the less informed and less articulate members of the community.

The main weakness of the Consumer Council was that it had no direct communication with consumers at grass-roots level. It did make several attempts to get approval for a national network of local advisory offices, but these were resisted by the Government, who regarded the services of the Citizens' Advice Bureau as adequate in coping with consumer problems at local level. Amidst considerable public outcry the Council was abolished in 1970 by the incoming Conservative Government.

The protests which followed the axing of the Consumer Council were the cause of some concern within the Conservative Government, so it was not long before they introduced an alternative programme of their own to deal with the many issues on which action was needed, and which the Consumer Council had had to leave lying dormant.

The appointment of the first Minister of State for Consumer Affairs, Sir Geoffrey Howe, was welcomed from many quarters. This approval proved to be justified since the Minister went on to take a very active part in seeing through some very important consumer legislation, including the Supply of Goods (Implied Terms) Act in 1973, the Fair Trading Act which set up the Office of Fair Trading in the same year, as well as giving much encouragement to local authorities to set up Consumer Advice Centres.

Consumer information at local level

When the Consumer Council was axed in 1970 the Government was fairly satisfied that, at local level, the Citizens' Advice Bureaux could act as the main source of consumer information and advice. The Molony Committee had in fact recommended that the CABx should be expanded to provide a countrywide consumer advisory service. There are a number of reasons why the CABx have failed to achieve this.

There are now 670 CABx operating throughout the country handling about two million enquiries a year. As the main information and advisory point in a local community a Bureau deals with a vast range of personal and family problems, including housing, employment, pensions, education, marital, as well as consumer problems. Virtually all have local authority grants, but the size of these varies considerably and can be as little as £20 a year. Inevitably, therefore, even though there is a considerable back-up from the National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureaux in terms of information resources, the quality of the service varies throughout the country as the NACABx freely admit. However, CABx see themselves as GPs and like GPs can only operate efficiently if they are properly supported by specialists.

Some of the specialist services themselves have not, however, developed in any consistent manner throughout the country. Although there are now 152 Housing Advisory Centres in the UK, they are administered and financed in a variety of ways. Some are financed by local authorities, others through Urban Aid grants; others may be Housing Aid Centres operated by Shelter or may have grown out of local community action projects.

Legal Advice Centres have also developed very much on an *ad hoc* basis. Of the 116 Legal Advice Centres, only thirteen are actual Law Centres where enquirers can draw upon the services of full-time salaried solicitors, who will handle a client's case from beginning to end.

Except for places like Sheffield, where there is a legal information service to co-ordinate the work of the six advice centres in the area, and Camden and Hackney who have their own Housing Research and Information Centres, there is little in the way of information back-up services to these housing and legal advisory services; and certainly no *centralized* information service similar to that operated by NACABx for CABx and, on a less rigid basis, that operated by CA for Consumer Advice Centres.

Trading Standards Departments and consumer information

As far as the ordinary consumer's access to information and advice in the local community is concerned, it is necessary to look at the development of the local authority department whose job has been to enforce the various legislative measures designed to protect the consumer at this local level, namely the Weights and Measures Inspectorate, later called Trading Standards or Consumer Protection Departments.

Weights and Measures legislation has been operating for hundreds of years: even the Magna Carta had proclaimed that there should be one measure of wine, one measure of corn and one measure of ale throughout the realm! The present law on Weights and Measures is based on the 1963 Act. But it was not until the passing of the Trade Descriptions Act (the so-called 'Shoppers' Charter') in 1968 that the work of the Trading Standards Officers came into the public eye.

With the number of complaints about false or misleading descriptions that the Trading Standards Departments had to deal with under the Trade Descriptions Act (it was estimated that there would be 50,000 a year on average—in fact there were nearly 100,000 in the first year), it began to become clear to these local government officers that consumers generally could probably benefit from the technical knowledge these officers had about goods and services and about the laws relating to their sale or operation. Instead of hiding behind closed doors in the depths of some gloomy town hall, some departments began to make themselves more accessible to the general public by opening consumer complaints offices in locations near to shopping centres. This happened in the sixties in places like Sheffield and Bristol; but it was not until CA's experimental *Which?* centre in Camden began operating in 1969 that the idea of providing independent factual information about goods and services *before* they were purchased, as opposed to making complaints about them *after* purchase, really began to interest local authority Trading Standards Departments.

In the following paper Gill Clegg will describe further what we would regard as the logical and necessary step in the development of the provision of consumer information and advice to all consumers—the high street Consumer Advice Centre. After all, the man in the street should be just as entitled to have easy access to information, near to where he is situated, as the man in the laboratory or the man in the Ministry. Maurice Line has said that, for all users of information, ‘expected ease of use, as well as physical accessibility, has a much higher priority than the expected quantity and quality of information.’¹¹ A large quantity of information, mostly of high quality, has been collected by various consumer organizations over quite a long period of time. What Consumer Advice Centres do is to make this information accessible to all.

2. Consumer Advice Centres (Gillian Clegg)

THE FIRST CONSUMER ADVICE CENTRE to advise consumers both how to deal with their shopping complaints, and to offer advice in the hitherto neglected field of help before buying, opened in Berlin in 1928. Established consumer advice centres have been operating for many years in several other European countries. The first British consumer advice centre, however, did not open its doors until 1969. This was the experimental *Which?* advice centre set up by Consumers’ Association and housed in converted shop premises in Kentish Town, North London.

Consumers’ Association’s involvement stemmed initially from research it had carried out into the idea of presenting *Which?* in a more popular journalistic style—something similar to the *Daily Mirror*. The survey was conducted in working class areas of London. It revealed that, not only did the idea of a ‘pop’ *Which?* have little appeal to the respondents, but also that working class consumers were resistant to receiving their shopping information from print at all. They preferred it by word of mouth.

Peter Goldman, Director of Consumers’ Association, explaining the experimental centre in *Which?* said ‘We are always being told that comparative testing has limited use because you, who read *Which?* are a privileged minority. Your education makes you able and willing to deal with *Which?* reports and arrive at a rational buying decision. Most people are not, and these people we should be trying to help. The idea behind this centre is that it will give personal word of mouth information and so reach people who are just not getting it from print.’¹²

The experimental centre was modelled on what Consumers’ Association considered to be the best working methods of the centres overseas, with a view to translating the consumer clinic idea into British terms and persuading local authorities to set up similar centres. The experiment was a success, and in 1972 when the centre had helped over 40,000 people, Consumers’ Association withdrew and handed the centre over to the London Borough of Camden who continue to run it.

There are now over seventy local authority run consumer advice centres throughout the country. The present Government has consistently encouraged

their establishment and the recent White Paper *The Attack on Inflation*¹³ has announced that the Government is prepared to finance more centres by means of a special exchequer grant to local authorities. Applications for this grant are now in the process of being submitted. There will probably be at least one hundred centres by the end of 1976.

Consumer advice centres not only represent a readily accessible and new information source for consumers, but also one of the most rapid developments in local authority services, and in the design of their centres, authorities have abandoned what some may consider their normal austere image, and created attractive premises with an informal atmosphere to encourage the idea that getting advice on shopping is as easy as the shopping itself.

An average advice centre now handles around 20,000 enquiries a year, and that number is growing fast. Interestingly, too, traders are beginning to recognize that consumer advice centres are not, to quote from the trade press, 'retailer bashers', but impartial and responsible advice and information agencies. The number of requests for help and information received from traders is increasing, and in many areas the advice centre is used as an informal arbitrator for shopping disputes.

Most consumer advice centres are sited in premises in the middle of a busy shopping area. They use their shop-front windows for informative displays. People are encouraged to browse around, help themselves to the free leaflet material available and look at further displays inside. Several centres provide play areas for children. Obviously, the shoppers' shop concept is not feasible for local authorities with large rural populations. Some of these authorities are experimenting with mobile advice centres and some operate a system of peripatetic advisers.

So what exactly do advice centres do? Their functions break down into the following areas: general advice and information; detailed pre-purchase counselling; helping consumers resolve their complaints; consumer education. The staff who work in advice centres do receive training. They undergo an intensive nine-week training course which covers, basically, the law as it relates to consumer rights; useful information sources and how to use them; technical information on household products; training in interview technique.

The general information side involves handling the many requests for specific items of information which can be answered from local knowledge and available information sources. For example: 'Where can I get a spare part for a twenty-year-old sewing machine?'; 'Is credit sale the same as hire purchase?'; 'Where is the nearest pet shop?' Pre-purchase counselling, on the other hand, relates to enquiries less specific than the examples above, and usually involves the purchase of major household items where decisions are difficult because of the enormous choice of available products (there are, for instance, about two hundred different domestic refrigerators on the market). These are the types of product where large sums of money are at risk and where individual needs and circumstances vary most widely. Advice centre staff faced with this sort of enquiry, conduct an interview (which lasts for about twenty minutes) with the consumer to draw out from him his personal requirements. If he was interested in purchasing a washing machine, for example, they would ask such questions

as how much money he wanted to spend, what size was his family, how much space was available in the kitchen, was the water pressure high or low. The centre staff would then give him, hopefully, adequate information based on his requirements to enable him to make his choice. Many advice centres have examples of household durables on permanent display so that advisers can use them to illustrate particular features to enquirers.

Pre-purchase counselling, it should be stressed, has nothing to do with recommending 'best buys'. Its purpose is to enable the consumer to exercise choice from a standpoint of information, not ignorance. Far too many complaints arise because shoppers are poorly informed and this short period of consultation before buying could save days of negotiation and worry in untangling a complaint afterwards. One major domestic appliance manufacturer is on record as saying that at least ten per cent of his service calls could be eliminated if consumers knew more about the appliances they were buying.

A relatively new aspect of advice centre work is the preparation and display of local price information. The present Government believes that price comparisons constitute a useful weapon in the battle against inflation and, again, exchequer grants are to be made available for more price monitoring work. Centre staff conduct a weekly price comparison of basic food products and household goods charged by named multiple shops in their locality. This information is displayed on boards, at present, only within centres themselves but the Government hopes that eventually it will also be displayed in libraries, town halls, shopping centres and published in the local press. The aim of price comparison work is to save the housewife's time in seeking out the cheapest buys, and to encourage more competition in the market place.

Advice centre staff act as impartial advisers to help consumers resolve their complaints quickly and fairly. When a criminal offence is suspected under legislation administered by the Trading Standards or other local authority departments, the complaints are referred to whichever department bears the statutory responsibility for them. In other cases, most frequently where civil dispute concerning faulty goods or unsatisfactory service is involved, the advice centre tells consumers what their legal rights are, acts as an informal arbitrator between trader and customer and, if necessary, arranges an independent test to establish the cause of the fault. If all this fails, the centre advises consumers how to achieve redress through the county court. Recently, some advice centre staff have extended their function to accompanying clients through county court proceedings.

The last major function of an advice centre's work is the provision of education on consumer matters to the local community. Advice centre staff frequently talk to local groups—particularly schools, women's organizations and local chambers of trade—on subjects such as how to buy wisely, and how the consumer is protected by the law. Often, too, the centre works closely with local schools in designing projects to be used in the classroom. Another important part of the consumer education function is the preparation of informative displays within the centre itself. Examples of typical displays are: the effects of metrication; the importance of correct shoe fitting for children; what to look for and think about when buying a carpet. Apart from providing information,

these displays are a way of attracting people to the centre and, hopefully, breaking down any resistance they might have about using it when they have a problem. One London centre organized a cola tasting test which proved so popular that police had to be called in to control the crowd!

Most centres have a good working relationship with the local media which enables them to ensure that topical items are given local publicity. In areas where there is a local radio station, centre staff usually have a regular spot, and a number of centres contribute a regular column to the local paper.

Having discussed what advice centres do, let us now turn to their information needs. Because this is a relatively new information field, there are, as yet, few suppliers of the specialist information sources needed. The main supplier is Consumers' Association which has set up a special unit to service consumer advice centres. This unit not only supplies information but also trains advice centre staff and provides a consultancy service to local authorities on setting up and running centres. The design of these services and courses is based on the experience Consumers' Association gained from its pioneer work in this field.

A unique feature of the information packages sold to advice centres by CA's Advice Centre Servicing Unit is a five volume directory listing every nationally available product in twenty-two major household durable markets. The information includes the price of the product, its measurements, its controls and features, whether it carries a safety approval mark and whether it has been tested by *Which?*. Updated directory sheets for each product category are sent to centres quarterly, and, in addition, they receive weekly information on individual new products to enable them to be as up to date with the market as is possible. This directory, along with manufacturers' leaflets and *Which?* reports, constitute the main information sources for pre-purchase counselling. Other information produced by the Advice Centre Servicing Unit includes:

- (a) A regularly updated *Directory of Consumer Information Sources*. Arranged by subject, this directory details trade associations, testing houses, legislation and publications related to that subject.
- (b) Daily and weekly bulletins which abstract information from the national and trade press on consumer matters such as product safety, new consumer legislation, trading practices, new products and other items of consumer interest.
- (c) A series of leaflets which outline the main points to consider before buying various household items. These leaflets are displayed in centres for people to take away, along with leaflets from other organizations such as the Office of Fair Trading and the British Standards Institution.

Centres subscribing to the information services also have the facility of a telephone enquiry service to Consumers' Association for problems they cannot resolve from their own resources. These tend to be the more complicated legal enquiries or requests for further product information, and the Advice Centre Servicing Unit can draw on all the specialist resources within Consumers' Association to provide the answer.

Despite the pressures of time, advice centres do manage to generate information of their own. This usually takes the form of information handouts to

accompany displays, such as lists of qualified shoe fitters in the area, explanatory information on the different ways of insulating the home. Some centres produce their own leaflets on subjects like buying a second hand motor car, door to door selling practices, and several centres have published, very successfully, shopping guides for old age pensioners which list local shops prepared to give discounts or sell small quantities to the elderly.

A close liaison exists between advice centres and the Office of Fair Trading. The Director General of Fair Trading sees centres as his 'eyes and ears in the market place'. The centres supply the Office with details of all the complaints they receive. This information is coded according to subject and trading practice to enable the Office to establish a nationwide pattern of the problems causing the most concern and therefore which trading practices and which individual traders the Director General should take action on under the Fair Trading Act 1973.

Additional information sources used by the advice centres are, of course, the standard reference books and trade directories. This is one of several areas where it would be nice to see more co-operation between advice centres and local libraries, since both are providing complementary information functions within the community. Few centres have, as yet, built up close links with their local libraries but there must be enormous scope for co-operation, particularly in access to information and in publicizing each other's service.

For any consumer advice centre to be successful, it must receive maximum publicity, especially in its early stages. This is normally achieved through leaflets and posters describing the service, and articles and broadcasts in the local media. Some centres are experimenting with less conventional methods such as printing the centre's address on beer mats, carrier bags and T-shirts. Word of mouth publicity is also important, particularly to promote interest in pre-purchase information which is unfamiliar to most consumers.

These types of publicity are fine for the reasonably aware consumer, but how do centres attract those who are less advantaged? This is an area where more work needs to be done, and it is particularly important that centres develop a close liaison with the local social service departments, home helps and those running adult literacy schemes to ensure that the centre's services are generally known to the community. Several authorities do now issue pre-paid complaints cards which are available from various local authority offices and taken round by social workers. Several authorities with large immigrant populations are beginning to translate leaflets into immigrant languages and also have qualified interpreters available when necessary. Many centres keep information on products designed specifically for the disabled, and at least one centre distributes complaints cards in braille to the registered blind to be returned to the centre when they have a problem.

Consumer advice centres are, of course, only one of the specialist advice agencies operating at local level. Apart from established bodies like the Citizens' Advice Bureaux, we now have legal advice centres, housing advice centres and a whole host of voluntary advice agencies. It would be unrealistic to imagine that consumer advice centres—using the narrow definition of consumer as shopper used throughout this paper—can operate successfully in isolation.

People do not always have neatly packaged problems. The woman with problems concerning hire purchase and budgeting may well have associated problems with her marriage and is perhaps not fully utilizing the services available to her from the welfare state. The various agencies do, at present, operate a loose referral system and some consumer advice centres do share their premises with other bodies. Many people involved in giving information and advice at local level are pressing for much closer liaison between these agencies, and it is interesting to note that several local authorities are now planning advice centres which incorporate the Citizens' Advice Bureau, consumer, housing and legal advice centres.

Should we therefore look towards the establishment of the High Street multi-purpose centre representing only one port of call for someone with a problem? Or would this create a more bureaucratic atmosphere which could deter those most in need of help? The provision of consumer advice in the High Street is still in its infancy, but the time has come for local authorities to assess and co-ordinate existing facilities to avoid duplication of effort and confusion to the consumer. It is important, though, that in doing so they do not lose sight of the basic concept of providing a people's advisory service which is efficient yet informal.

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